

States make in human capital must be considered an essential component of their efforts to promote North America's competitiveness and economic growth with justice and security for our peoples.

Finally, Presidents Calderon and Bush reiterated their conviction that the future of Mexico and the United States—and of the whole North American region—is now, more than ever, a shared future. Our commitment to the advancement of democracy, the respect for human rights, the promotion of free markets, the rule of law, security, sustainable development, and expanding opportunity for all, they underlined, will contribute to the consolidation of a prosperous, just, and peaceful future for all citizens in the Americas.

NOTE: The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of this joint statement. An original was not available for verification of the content of this joint statement.

Remarks Following a Meeting With Vice President Adil Abd Al-Mahdi of Iraq

March 15, 2007

The President. It is such an honor to welcome the Vice President of a free Iraq to the Oval Office.

Mr. Vice President, I appreciate your courage. I don't know if the citizens of my country know, but the other day, a killer tried to take your life. And fortunately, you sit here, and you speak with enthusiasm and optimism about the future of your country.

One of the reasons why—the main reason why I've reinforced our troops in Iraq is to give leaders such as yourself the opportunity to do the hard work of reconciliation. I appreciate very much the progress that you're making. I know it's hard work. It's hard work to overcome distrust that has built up over the years because your country was ruled by a tyrant that created distrust amongst people.

But you, Mr. Vice President, are showing strong vision and a vision of peace and reconciliation. And I welcome you to the Oval Office. I thank you for your courage, and I thank you for the conversation we've had.

Vice President Abd Al-Mahdi. Thank you. Thank you, President. Thank you for receiving me, and the present occasion to thank you personally and to thank the American people for all the support you've given to Iraq, the sacrifices. Also, I visited yesterday some soldiers in the hospital, and I saw their high spirit. They had, really, better morality than I had, talking about their mission.

We are working hard together. Our security plan is marking some points. We are not finished, but we are doing better than expected in this plan. This will not solve the whole problem; the reconciliation process will take our political agenda forward. We are working on many issues: the hydrocarbon bill, which we approved in the Cabinet; we are working on a de-Baathification bill, and it will be presented later. We are working on so many things.

So, really, I want to take this occasion to thank all Americans—the United States, you, Mr. President, the Congress, the administration—for all the sacrifices, effort, assistance given to help my country. Thank you.

The President. Thank you, sir. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:55 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House.

Remarks at the National Republican Congressional Committee Dinner

March 15, 2007

Thank you all. Please be seated. Thanks for the warm welcome. I had the honor of representing our great country over the past week in five different countries in our neighborhood—but I must tell you, it sure is good to be home. And it sure is good to be with you all. I'm proud to be standing with strong leaders like John Boehner and Roy Blunt. I thank you all for recognizing that it's in the best interest of the United States of America that John Boehner become the next Speaker of the House of Representatives.

Some of you may not know about my early political career—I ran for the United States Congress in 1978 in west Texas. I came in second place—in a two-man race. [Laughter] The campaign obviously didn't turn out the way I hoped it would, but things worked out okay in the end. The key is to learn from

every election and to come back stronger. And with your help, that's exactly what we're going to do in 2008.

I appreciate the character of the men and women on the Republican side of the United States House of Representatives. I've gotten to know them well over the last 6-plus years. But tonight I think it's appropriate we remember the life of a good man and a devoted public servant, Congressman Charlie Norwood. He fought lung cancer; he's in our thoughts and prayers; and we send our very best to Gloria and their family.

I appreciate the fact that you invited Laura, John. It's a smart move to invite her—actually, she was Boehner's first choice. *[Laughter]* She is still traveling, but she sends her love and her respect. I know I'm not very objective, but I firmly believe Laura, in all due respect to my mother, is the finest First Lady our country has ever had. Well, mom was pretty good too—mom was pretty good too. She's still telling me what to do, for all you mothers out there.

I want to thank Congressman Tom Cole, who is the chairman of the NRCC. I've known Tom a long time. He comes from right north of Texas. The NRCC has got one competent, smart, able person in Tom Cole, and I appreciate you serving, Tom. I really thank Devin Nunes, from California, for his leadership in this dinner tonight. Devin, it's good to see you; thank you for being here. I know I mentioned his name once; I'm going to mention it again, the House Republican whip, Roy Blunt from Missouri, is doing a fine job. I appreciate you, Roy. I'm proud to be with Cantor, Putnam, Granger, McCotter, Carter, and all the rest of the Members of the House of Representatives. Thanks for coming; appreciate you being here.

But most of all, thank you all for supporting this good group of folks. Obviously, it takes support like yours to get us back in the majority, but it also takes good ideas and takes people who are willing to stand on principle; people not driven by polls or focus groups, but people who stand for what they believe no matter what the critics may say. We believe in a strong national defense. We believe in less government and lower taxes. And we believe that government ought to

trust the American people to make the best decisions for their lives.

Ours is an optimistic agenda, and ours is a realistic agenda. And by pushing good ideas and standing strong for what's right, I believe that we can retake the Senate and the House and hold the White House in 2008.

The biggest challenge we face is to protect the American people from harm. You know, I recognize that after September the 11th, it would be easy for our Nation to let down its guard. I knew that the farther we got away from that tragic event, the more likely scenario would be that people would say, "Well, maybe the enemy is not there." And frankly, that's okay. It's not okay, however, if your Federal Government forgets their responsibility. And I just want you to know that every day, I think about and my administration thinks about our most important task, and that is to defend you. And the best way to do so is to stay on the offense and defeat the enemy overseas so we do not have to face them here at home.

We are chasing down the enemy by using good intelligence and by deploying some of the finest citizens our country has ever produced. And we will defeat the enemy in the long term by defeating their hateful ideology with an ideology of hope, based upon the universal concept of liberty.

This war on terror is fought on many fronts: in Afghanistan; in places like the Philippines; and around the globe. But the central front in this war—the central front, and our need to protect the American people, is being fought in Iraq. We're pursuing a new strategy in Iraq, a plan that demands more from Iraq's Government; a plan that brings security to Baghdad, as our top priority; and a plan that gives our troops the reinforcements they need to carry out their mission.

In Washington, we also have important decisions to make on Iraq. And the most pivotal question is whether the United States Congress will stand behind our new commander, General David Petraeus, and give our commanders the flexibility they need to do their jobs and our troops the support they need to carry out their mission.

Next week, the House will begin debate on an emergency war spending bill. Some

in the Congress are using this bill as an opportunity to micromanage our military commanders or to force a precipitous withdrawal in Iraq or threaten vital funding for Iraqi security forces and fund projects that have nothing to do with the war on terror. I believe the Members of Congress are sincere when they support our troops. And now is the time for them to show that support. Our men and women in uniform are risking their lives, and they need the firm support of the United States Congress.

Today the United States Senate wisely rejected a resolution that would have placed an artificial timetable on our mission in Iraq. And I thank the Republicans and Democrats who voted down that resolution. Many of those Members know what I know, that if American forces were to step back from Baghdad now, before the capital city is more secure, the scale and scope of attacks would increase and intensify; a contagion of violence could spill out across the entire country and, in time, the entire region. The enemy would emerge from the chaos emboldened, with new safe havens and new recruits and new resources and an even greater determination to harm the United States of America. If we were to leave Iraq before the job is done, the enemy would follow us to the United States of America, and we're not going to let it happen.

We've got work to do to make sure this economy continues to stay strong. Our principle is that if we trust you with your money, if the American people have more of their own money to save and spend and invest, the economy flourishes. And so we cut the taxes on the American people. We cut taxes for everybody who pays taxes in America. And our plan is working—this economy of the United States is strong.

America—not government, but America—has created more than 7.5 million jobs in the past 3½ years. Unemployment is low; inflation is low; wages are rising. This economy is on the move, and the best way to keep it moving is to make the tax cuts we passed permanent.

Oh, I know you'll hear the argument here that you've got to raise taxes to balance the budget, but we're proving them wrong. I set a goal that we would cut the deficit in half

in 5 years; we completed that goal years ahead of schedule. Why? Because when the economy grows, tax revenues increase. And the other reason why is because I worked with Republican leaders to bring fiscal sanity to the United States Congress. The best way to balance the budget is to grow the economy and not overspend the people's money. So I'm looking forward to working with John and Roy and the other Members of the House to pass a budget that can eliminate the Federal deficit within the next 5 years without raising taxes on the American people.

We need to come together to solve hard problems. One of the hardest problems in Washington is to reform Social Security and Medicare. There are a lot of baby boomers, like me, getting ready to retire. As a matter of fact, my retirement age of 62 is right around the corner, which will be a convenient time. *[Laughter]* And there are a lot of people like me. There are a lot of baby boomers who have been promised greater benefits than the previous generation, but the problem is, there are fewer people paying into the system and the system cannot be sustained.

My attitude—now is the time for Republicans and Democrats to come together, to put their ideas on the table, to reform Social Security and Medicare to save a future generation from onerous taxes. Now is the time to act; now is the time to put politics aside; and now is the time to do the hard work the people of the United States of America expect us to do.

We believe strongly that this country needs to remain competitive so that we can remain the economic leader in the world. And one of the best ways to remain competitive is to make sure our youngsters get a good, sound education. I believe strongly in local control of schools, but I also believe in raising standards and holding schools accountable for achieving results.

I don't see how you can solve a problem unless you diagnose a problem. And that's precisely the spirit behind the No Child Left Behind Act. Because we're measuring and because we're holding people to standards, test scores are rising all across the United States of America. We're getting better test

scores in reading and math, and most importantly of all, our minority students are beginning to close the achievement gap. The No Child Left Behind Act is working, and the United States Congress needs to reauthorize that good piece of legislation.

We believe that dependency on oil from overseas is a national security and economic security risk. You see, when you import a lot of oil from parts of the world that may not care for the United States of America, that's a national security risk. Or when you import a lot of oil from parts of the world where supply could be disrupted by a terrorist attack, that is a national security risk. We live in a global world, and as demand for crude oil rises in emerging economies like China and India, it causes the price of crude oil to go up, which raises the price of gasoline for you. And therefore, reliance upon oil is an economic security risk. And therefore, I look forward to continuing to work with the United States Congress to diversify our way out of dependency on oil.

And we're making good progress. We have got a comprehensive policy to do so. We believe in nuclear power. We believe in clean coal technology. We believe in solar and wind energy. And we believe in spending taxpayers' money to develop technologies that will change the way we—change how we power automobiles. We're spending a lot of your money to develop new batteries so that within a short period of time, there will be plug-in hybrid batteries—which means if you're living in a city, you can drive the first 20 miles on electricity and not on gasoline. And I also strongly believe that it makes sense to empower our farmers to grow crops that can be converted into energy, like ethanol and biodiesel.

We're on the verge of important technological breakthroughs here in America, technological breakthroughs that will enable a future President and future Congresses to say, "We have done our duty for national security reasons, for economic security reasons—all of which, as well, will enable us to be better stewards of our environment."

We have got an issue with health care in the United States of America. If you're running a small business, you understand the pressures you feel as a result of growing

health care costs. But I caution you in this debate to remember, there is a philosophical divide in Washington between those who believe that government is the best provider of health care and those of us who believe that the best decisionmakers for health care are the providers and the patients.

Government has got a responsibility to the poor, and we're meeting that responsibility. We've got a responsibility to the elderly. And thanks to the leadership of people like John Boehner and Roy Blunt, we modernized Medicare by doing something unusual in medicine—we actually interjected marketplace forces; we included the marketplace. We said, our seniors should be allowed to make choices about what's best for them. Costs projected for Medicare are lower than expected. The market works. And the reforms we passed for Medicare are good, solid reforms for America's seniors.

We've got a strong record to run on, and we're going to make it stronger by passing association health plans. If you're a small business, you should be allowed to pool risk across jurisdictional boundaries so you can buy insurance at the same discount that larger companies are able to buy insurance.

We believe strongly in health savings accounts, which empowers consumers to shop in the marketplace for—to meet their health care needs. But we also understand that there must be transparency in health care for pricing and quality. We strongly believe in interjecting information technologies into health care—all aimed to hold down the cost of health care without inviting more government into your lives.

And finally, if you're interested in controlling health care costs and if you want to make sure health care is available, elect people who will vote for medical liability reform. There are too many lawsuits running too many good doctors out of practice in America.

I'm looking forward to working with the United States Congress on an idea that we put forward that will make private health insurance more affordable and more accessible to more of our citizens, and that is to change the Tax Code. I believe strongly that we ought to create a standard tax deduction for

health insurance like the standard tax deduction for dependents. A family with health insurance would get a \$15,000 deduction from incoming payroll taxes, whether they buy coverage on their own or get it from their employer. If you're single, you get a \$7,500 deduction. The whole purpose of the plan is to level the playing field to give those who buy insurance on their own the same tax advantage as those who get insurance through their jobs.

I know I'm not talking to Senators here—[laughter]—but I do want to assure you all that I will continue to fulfill my obligation to put people on our benches who will strictly interpret the law and not legislate from the bench.

We've got a full agenda, and we're working well together. Ours is an agenda based upon solid philosophy that we don't need more government, but we need more trust in the American people. Ours is an agenda that says, if you have more of your own money, the country benefits. And ours is an agenda that recognizes our primary responsibility is to stay steady and focused and defeat the enemy of the United States of America and leave behind a more secure America for generations to come.

The greatest honor of being the President is to represent a group of decent, honorable folks. And those are the people of the United States. I cannot tell you what a joy it is to travel our country and to meet quiet, compassionate people who, on a daily basis, love their neighbor just like they'd like to be loved themselves.

Oftentimes, I'm asked to define the strength of the country—and, sure, our military is strong, and we're going to keep it that way; and, yes, our wallets are fat, and hopefully, they get fatter for all of us. But the great strength of the United States of America, the true strength of this country is the fact that there are millions of fellow citizens who, on a daily basis, reach out to somebody in need; they reach out to say, "How can I help you, brother? What can I do to make your life better?" People who say, "If you need a little love in your life, you can count on me." This country is changing one heart and one soul and one body at a time because

we've got millions of our fellow citizens who love our country and love their neighbors.

I'm optimistic about this country. You've got to know something about your President: I am some kind of optimistic about where we're headed. We're a great nation, and we intend to keep it that way. And I thank you for your help.

May God bless you. May God bless your families. And may God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 6:39 p.m. at the Washington Hilton Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Gloria Norwood, wife of former Representative Charles W. Norwood, Jr.; and Gen. David H. Petraeus, USA, commanding general, Multi-National Force—Iraq.

Remarks Following a Meeting With the President's Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors

March 16, 2007

A couple of weeks ago I announced that Senator Dole and Secretary Shalala agreed to chair a Commission of our fellow citizens to look into the health care that our veterans and those in the military are receiving.

Today I was pleased to meet the Commission members that have been selected. We've got Purple Heart recipients; got the wife of a severely wounded troop; we've got a doctor; we've got compassionate people who all care about whether or not our Government is fulfilling its responsibility to make sure our health care systems, both at DOD, Defense Department, and at the Veterans Administration, are meeting our obligations.

And I assured the members of this committee that I will support their work and will address the problems that they find. We owe it to those who wear the uniform and their families to make sure that our troops have the best, and that's what this Commission is meant to do. And I thank you for your willingness to serve. You're doing the country a great service, because the Commission report will ensure that service goes beyond my time in office. In other words, it'll really set